

THE PLAYING CARD ART *of* ARTHUR SZYK



By Arthur Kurzweil

Pick a card design, any card design.

They say that Dai Vernon liked Tally-Ho, as did John Scarne. And I hear that Harry Lorayne, who often used Tally-Ho on camera, says he prefers "the one that's handed to me." The best card guys will almost always say that.

Bee is often not popular among magicians; one of its design elements can sometimes be a real disadvantage. But then there are occasions, I'm told, when the Bee design offers an advantage. The best card guys say they couldn't care less.

Popular for many gaffed decks and packets has been Fox Lake. Some great card guys say they never use trick decks or gaffed cards, but the very best workers respect those of us who do.

Then there is the Bulldog Squeezer, which seems to pop up every once in a while. "Bulldog" because of the two canines in the design on the back; "squeezers" because they were among those designed decades ago to prevent a corner peek when held by the player in a curved and closely held fan.

Bicycle, of course, is currently the most popular in the United States, yet I'm always amused when someone who frequently uses them hasn't noticed why they are called Bicycle.

Where am I going with all this?

Well, sometimes the opportunity to create a magical moment calls for something extra special, even in the case of a card trick. Those of us who teach through our magic have discovered that an unusual deck of cards, with the right design, can support the goals of the performance. For me, that deck has recently been published, and its design is based on the playing card art of artist Arthur Szyk (1894-1951).

Born in Poland, Arthur Szyk (pronounced "shick") arrived in the United States



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in 1940. His long and varied career as an artist included important work for the American propaganda efforts as a political caricaturist during World War II. Eleanor Roosevelt said of Szyk, and in particular of Szyk's brutal caricatures of Hitler, Mussolini, and Hirohito, "This is a personal war of Szyk against Hitler, and I do not think Mr. Szyk will lose this war." Szyk caricatured Hitler in many ways including as images of Attila the Hun, a buffoon, and the wicked Pharaoh of ancient Egypt. Szyk often referred to himself as a "soldier in art."

In the 1930s Arthur Szyk joined a long artistic tradition by illustrating an exquisite set of playing cards. Each of the twelve court cards features a different biblical or ancient hero. Historicana, an art dealer and antiquarian bookseller of high regard in Burlingame, California (www.szyk.com), has published two different decks of playing cards using Szyk's amazing art, along with twelve fine art prints of the court cards. While Arthur Szyk designed the deck over seventy years ago, this is the first time it has been manufactured as a complete deck of playing cards. One deck now available, a "collector's deck," is gilt-edged; the other, a "playing deck," is the one I feel free to use and take around with me. These cards are unique, quite beautiful, and truly meaningful on many levels. Since their source is off the beaten track for magicians, I want to alert you to it.

Arthur Kurzweil is a writer, publisher, teacher, and performing magician. He is the author of several books including two in the well-known "for Dummies" series: Kabbalah for Dummies and The Torah for Dummies. Arthur has been a member of the I.B.M. for almost twenty years. Visit him online at www.arthurkurzweil.com.